

Vanderbilt University Gymnasium
(now Fine Arts Building)
23rd Avenue, North, and West End Blvd.
Nashville
Davidson County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-11

HABS,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Architectural and Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS NO. TENN-11

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY, GYMNASIUM (now Fine Arts Bldg.)

Location: Southwest corner 23rd Avenue North and West End Blvd.,
Vanderbilt University campus
Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee

Present Owner: Vanderbilt University

Present Occupant: Department of Fine Arts

Present Use: Fine Arts Museum and Instruction Center

Statement of Significance: Completed in 1880, the Vanderbilt facility, with its considerable gymnastic equipment and indoor running track, was one of the earliest and best equipped gymnasiums in the South. Though the interior has been substantially modified from the original, the exterior of this striking building preserves the rich Victorian architectural character of the early Vanderbilt campus, and is one of the few major buildings to survive from that period.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and Subsequent Owners: The land upon which the Gymnasium was erected was purchased by Vanderbilt University from those heirs to which the respective portions of the William F. Elliston estate had been parceled [see: RODC Deed Book 51, p. 591; DB 54, p. 329; DB 55, p. 156; and DB 58, p. 625; for plat of property, see DB 50, p. 311]. Vanderbilt University has continued ownership of this property to the present day.
2. Date of Erection: Construction was begun some time in the latter half -- perhaps early September -- of 1879. The building was completed, according to the Minutes of the Board of Trust, before May 24, 1880.
4. Architect: The architect is assumed to be Peter J. Williamson. Three buildings are known to have been erected at Vanderbilt between 1879 and 1881: the Gymnasium, the Science Building, and Wesley

Hall, completed in that order. Two contracts between Bishop H. N. McTyeire, acting on behalf of W. H. Vanderbilt and Vanderbilt University, and Peter J. Williamson, Nashville architect, may shed light on the matter [see the John J. Tigert Papers, deposited in the Special Collection of the Joint University Library in Nashville, Tennessee]. The first contract, dated August 28, 1879, calls for Williamson to ". . . prepare the plans and specifications and draw up the necessary contracts, and superintend the [construction] of two buildings on the Vanderbilt grounds." The deduction that the above contract provides for both the Gymnasium and the Science Building seems to be borne out by the fact that the second contract in question between McTyeire and Williamson, dated January 7, 1880, provides for Williamson's services specifically for the design and erection only of Wesley Hall. Moreover, plans and specifications are known to have existed for the Gymnasium: in a bid, dated September 15, 1879 (and accepted by McTyeire on the 18th of that month), Harry Gammerer proposes ". . . to do tin, slate, galvanized iron work for the Gymnasium . . . according to Plans & Specifications . . ." [Tigert Papers, op. cit.].

4. Builder or Contractor and Suppliers: The builder is assumed to be John C. Breeding on the strength of a contract executed between McTyeire and Breeding, dated August 7, 1879, wherein Breeding, ". . . builder and carpenter . . . [is to be paid] One thousand Dollars a year for his services, beginning this day . . . to doing or superintending such work as said H. N. McTyeire shall direct . . ." [Tigert Papers, op. cit.]. This, too, is corroborated by a memorandum, dated October 25, 1879, in which J. C. Breeding notes the quantity of brick used in the Gymnasium (287,850, corrected to 289,850). [Tigert Papers, op. cit.].

The same memorandum concerning the number of bricks notes that the brickwork was performed by Mr. McCadaster & Co.

As has already been noted above, the tin, slate, and galvanized iron work for the gymnasium was done by Henry Grammerer; the amount stipulated in the bid is \$1,125.00 [Bid dated September 15, 1879: Tigert Papers, op. cit.].

There exists a contract executed in New York City on September 27, 1879, between a Mr. Harry Hammersly, agent for Vanderbilt University, and M. Hawkins, supplier of the gymnastic apparatus ordered for the Vanderbilt Gymnasium (see Appendix) [Tigert Papers, op. cit.].

5. Original Plans and Construction: No plans or construction documents for the Gymnasium are known to have survived to the present day. However, the Announcement of Vanderbilt University, 1879-1880 provides a contemporary description of the facility upon its completion:

The Gymnasium is a brick building, 90x60 feet, of handsome architectural design, and substantial. It has a basement containing dressing and bath-rooms, and rooms for special exercise, a principal floor for general exercise and training, and visitors' galleries accessible from the exterior by winding stairways in two of the towers.

The principal story is a single room for general exercise, 80x40 feet, with the ceiling thirty-two feet high. It contains a running and walking track, and a complete equipment of gymnastic apparatus, comprising rowing machines, chest-expanders, parallel and horizontal ladders, springboards, Indian clubs, dumb-bells, etc. [p. 23]

In his History of Davidson County, Tennessee (Philadelphia, 1880), W. W. Clayton observes that the gymnasium "... is thought by many visitors, who daily drive through the park-like grounds, to be the best specimen of architecture presented . . ." [p. 260]

The exterior of the old Gymnasium's Victorian design has survived to the present day substantially unaltered, save for the minor modifications noted below.

6. Notes on Alterations and Additions: No systematic record of any alterations or modifications that may have been carried out through the years is known either to have been kept or to have survived.

It is known that a "temporary" annex was added to the southeast side of the Gymnasium in 1920. The 1914 edition (revised to 1920) of Sanborn's Insurance Maps of Nashville, Tennessee, shows the annex to be a 22x44 frame structure, with wire lath and stucco [Vol. 4, plate 496].

In 1962, the gymnasium was substantially renovated on the interior and converted into a Fine Arts Building. Warfield & Associates of Nashville, Tennessee, were the architects for this project. The "temporary" stucco annex was removed, and the exterior of the brick building was restored. The only significant modifications from the original exterior came with the reconstruction of the southeast wall, which had been in common with the annex. The windows which are known to have existed in this wall, as seen a photograph taken of the building prior to the addition of the annex (see below), are now absent, and the wall is devoid of any such openings.

On the southwest facade, the two original flues, articulated on the wall as projected pilasters and rising originally through the eave of the roof a substantial height into the air, have been removed; two dormers, designed to match the originals on the two adjoining sides, were placed approximately on center with those remaining portions of the flues, below the eaves, that now read simply as exaggerated pilasters.

The original interior volume has been totally obliterated by the remodelling, and the only prominent surviving elements that can be seen at the present time are the roof trusses, left substantially exposed, and the wood floor on the first floor.

The basement has been heavily partitioned to provide service facilities, as well as a sculpture studio with storage and work rooms. The main floor, unchanged from the original level, now houses an art gallery, several offices, and a small classroom, and has been encased in a partitioned enclosure set some three feet within the longitudinal exterior walls of the building. The second floor, created by placing a new concrete deck at the approximate level of the

old running track, now houses a painting studio, a large classroom (where the original roof trusses may be seen), and several offices.

Numerous drawings relating to the old gymnasium are presently on deposit at the Building Projects Department of the Plant Operations Office at Vanderbilt University:

Two sheets of plans for the basement and first floor of the gymnasium, dated October 28, 1950, depict the interior arrangement of the gymnasium as surveyed in October, 1950.

A transverse section drawing of the gymnasium, dated February 26, 1959, and identified "Original No. T-4-3-30," is the only drawing which has been found to indicate the location of the elevated running track. This drawing also notes the existence of a stage between the northwest wall of the annex and the southeast wall of the gymnasium, indicating that the space between the two common walls was subsequently converted into a stage; the Sanford map of Nashville [op. cit.], shows this space to have been unoccupied at that time.

A five-page set of architectural drawings, prepared by Warfield & Associates and dated November 9, 1959 (revised April 17, 1961), together with corresponding sets of structural, electrical, mechanical, and other drawings were prepared for the 1962 remodelling project and may be consulted to document the scope and extent of the project and its modification of the original fabric.

7. Important Old Views: Surprisingly few photographs and drawings of the building were uncovered in the course of the present research.

The Announcement of Vanderbilt University, 1879-1880, as well as announcements for subsequent years, published a lithograph view of the building [p. 24].

A photograph of the building is deposited in the Special Collection of the Joint University Library in Nashville, Tennessee, in the "Views of the Campus" collection. The photograph is unidentified and undated, but is obviously prior to the time in which the annex was added: there is no sign of the annex, and the southeast wall clearly

indicates the existence of windows in a pattern matching that on the companion northwest wall.

A woodcut panorama of the Vanderbilt campus is contained in W. W. Clayton's A History of Davidson County, Tennessee (Philadelphia, 1880). Dating from the year in which the Gymnasium was completed, the panorama depicts the lively Victorian architectural character of the Vanderbilt campus five years after the university opened; the gymnasium appears on the far right of the view.

B. Historical Events and Persons

Vanderbilt University was chartered originally in 1872 as the Central University by the Methodist Episcopal Church of the South [CCDC Minute Book W, p. 267], under whose control the University operated until 1914. In 1873, however, Bishop Holland N. McTyeire secured from Cornelius Vanderbilt of New York an endowment for the University in the amount of \$500,000. Mr. Vanderbilt subsequently increased his endowment to one million dollars, and the name was changed to Vanderbilt University [CCDC Minute Book X, p. 309].

The construction of the Gymnasium was made possible through the benefaction of William H. Vanderbilt, Cornelius Vanderbilt's eldest son. Following his father's death in 1877, William Vanderbilt became the University's principal patron. In July of 1879, he promised to give \$100,000, a sum later raised to \$150,000, for the purpose of erecting three buildings -- the Gymnasium, Science Hall, and Wesley Hall.

Peter J. Williamson, who is presently assumed to have been the architect of the Gymnasium, was one of the pioneer architects of Nashville. Coming to this country from Holland prior to the Civil War, he settled in Wisconsin and volunteered in the Federal Army, winning the rank of Major before the close of the war. He subsequently settled in Nashville, where he became a member of the architectural firm of Dobson & Williamson [Obituary, Nashville American, February 18, 1907]. He was also the architect for Science Hall and Wesley Hall at Vanderbilt.

C. Sources of Information

1. Primary Sources:

Announcement of Vanderbilt University, 1879-1880
(Nashville, 1880), 23-24.

Chancery Court for Davidson County, Tennessee
Minute Book "W," p. 267.
Minute Book "X," p. 309.

Register's Office for Davidson County, Tennessee
Deed Book 50, p. 311
Deed Book 51, p. 591
Deed Book 54, p. 329
Deed Book 55, p. 156
Deed Book 58, p. 625

The John James Tigert Papers, 1824-1957. In the
Special Collection of the Joint University
Library, Nashville, Tennessee (chronologic-
ally):

Contract, dated August 7, 1879, between
H. N. McTyeire and John E. Breeding,
builder and carpenter.
Contract, dated August 28, 1879, between
Peter J. Williamson, architect.
Bid, dated September 15, 1879, from Henry
Grammerer on the tin, slate, & galva-
nized iron work for the Gymnasium.
Contract, dated September 27, 1879, between
Harry Hammersley, agent for Vanderbilt
University, and M. Hawkins, New York
supplier of gymnastic apparatus for the
Gymnasium.
Memorandum, dated October 25, 1879, stating
number of bricks, with correction of
that amount, in the Gymnasium, by
J. C. Breeding.
Contract, dated January 7, 1880, between
H. N. McTyeire and P. J. Williamson,
architect, for Wesley Hall.

2. Secondary Sources:

W. W. Clayton, "Vanderbilt University," in his
History of Davidson County, Tennessee, with
Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of
Its Prominent Men (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis
& Co., 1880), 259-260.

Federal Writers' Project, Tennessee: A Guide to the State (New York: Viking Press, 1939), 197-198.

History of Nashville, Tennessee, John Wooldridge, ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: H. W. Crew, 1890), 420.

Insurance Maps of Nashville, Tennessee (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1914), vol. 4, plate 496 [pages unnumbered].

[Robert A. McGaw], "The Old Gym," in A Selection of New Works by Nashville Artists. Catalogue for the first exhibition at the Vanderbilt Art Gallery [in the Fine Arts Building, formerly the Gymnasium], February 4 through 25, 1962), 13-14.

Edwin Mims, History of Vanderbilt University (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1946), 110.

D. Supplementary Material:

The following contract, which has been cited in the report, is reproduced in order render a precise picture of both the type and extent of gymnastic apparatus with which the Vanderbilt gymnasium was equipped.

New York Sept. 27th 1879

I have this day made a contract with Mr. Harry Hammersley whereby I agree to build and deliver to any dock or depot in this city as may be directed by and for the Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. the following named articles of Gymnastic Apparatus

- one (1) Steel centre Horizontal Bar full rig complete
- one (1) Steel centre Horizontal Bar 6 ft 4 over all with plates on ends
- one (1) Leaping Rig #1 complete ready to set up
- one (1) Vaulting Board #1 all complete ready to Set up Board to be 3 x 9 ft
- one (1) Horse to rise from 5 to 6 feet Leather-padded-pumells & C 5 ft long no Neck

- one (1) Level and Two (2) Inclined ladders with
2 5/8 Bolts length in all 64 ft.
- two (2) Horizontal Ladders (1) 20 ft 41 ft
(1) 21 ft
- one (1) Set Parallel Bars with 3 round Bars
14 ft. long 4 ft 11 high Turned Posts
& c all complete
- one (1) Lashell with 2 Bars 4 rings 2 Trapezes
Ropes wire ropes & c complete as in
diagram
- Twelve (12) Handles with ropes spliced
- one (1) Step Bars rise 3 1/2 in with 16 steps
all complete 17 in inside
- one (1) Chest Expander made of Walnut

Payment to be made by draft on New York immediately
on reception of the above named articles ready to be
shipped from New York in about 20 days from date
Sept. 27, 1879. The amount of contract for the above
articles is Four Hundred and Thirty four dollars
(\$434.00)

(Signed):

M. Hawkins
H. Hammersley
Agt. for Vanderbilt Univsty.

[end of contract]

Prepared by: Anatole Senkevitch, Jr.
Architectural Historian
& Architect
National Park Service
Summer, 1970

PART II ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The roof of this building is distinguished by various towers and a patterned slate covering.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The two-story structure measures 56'-11" x 96'-8".
2. Foundations: Tennessee limestone.
3. Walls: Red brick laid in a common bond.
4. Structural system: Masonry load-bearing walls. Roof supported by a wooden truss.
5. Stoops: Concrete stoop at the main entry. Bulkhead at the west side basement entrance and windows. Bulkhead (25") at areaway along the north wall.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Main entrance door is set in a segmentally arched opening. The wooden double door has four panels.
 - b. Windows: The segmentally arched windows have four-over-four-light double-hung sash. The windows in the largest tower are narrower, having two-over-two lights. The circular window over the main entrance has eight lights.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Mansard roof with alternating rectangular and fish-scale slate shingles.
 - b. Cornice: Raked wooden cornice with notched molding.
 - c. Dormers and towers: Four gable dormers on the southeast and northwest sides, and two dormers on the southwest end. There is an octagonal two-story

tower on the east corner, and square one-story towers on the other three corners.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: Mechanical equipment is stored along the southeast wall.
- b. First floor: The foyer and offices are in the northeast end and a classroom is in the southwest end, leaving most of the first floor as exhibition space. Stairways are in north and south towers and offices are in east and west towers.

2. Stairways: Metal stairways in north and south towers connect three levels.

3. Flooring: Asbestos tile on concrete, exposed concrete and exposed hardwood.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Exposed brick walls. First-floor ceiling has acoustical tile while second-floor ceiling has exposed trusses.

5. Doorways and doors: Hollow metal and solid core wooden interior doors.

D. Site: The building faces northeast on the north side of the Vanderbilt campus. It is on the southwest corner of the intersection of 23rd Avenue North and West End Boulevard.

Prepared by: Roy C. Pledger
Project Supervisor
Historic American
Buildings Survey
August 1970

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the National Park Service in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the Historic Sites Federation of Tennessee. Measured and drawn July 1970, under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, and Roy C. Pledger, project supervisor (Texas A & M University), Anatole Senkevitch, Jr., historian (University of Virginia, by student architects Donald W. Graham and William H. Edwards (University of Illinois), and Donna G. Woodrum and Robert J. Dunay (Virginia Polytechnic Institute), at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. The photographer was Jack E. Boucher of the HABS staff.